Stepdaughters of the Army

By AN ARMY RECONSTRUCTION AIDE.

YESTERDAY we were four years distant from the signing of the Armistice. The day found us looking at the case of the disabled ex-service man with a casual aloofness. When he got back into civies, he failed to provide us with thrills. He is costing us a great deal of money. We have been told that he is lazy, unappreciative and improvident. He has even got drunk, thieved and murdered. Yes. But, as he used to say with his delightful swagger, "I'll tell the world," when the stage was set, he played the hero well. This is not a story of how he went over the top but of how he faced his shattering experience—deafness, blindness, paralysis, loss of limb and limbs, disfigurement to the degree of repulsiveness—while he was in the hospital.

In 1917, like every other woman in the country, I was simply aching to get into the service. Possessing none of the qualifications for scrubbing hospital floors, for driving ambulances in France, for making pies back of the firing line, I, a school teacher, realized that I had better stick to my job, march in parades, help war-drives and knit.

In 1918, there came to me an amazing inquiry. The Office of the Surgeon General of the Army was making its plans for beginning the work of the vocational rehabilitation of the wounded before they should be discharged from the service. Would I take charge of the special unit that was being organized to teach lip-reading to the deafened and speech to the speechless? Would I? That job of mine, toward which I had been feeling so contemptuous, had justified itself.

Thus it came about that in July, 1918, I was sent to a newly opened hospital on the Atlantic coast. I bore the designation of Reconstruction Aide, Medical Department at Large, United States Army. The hospital had formerly been an ultra luxurious summer hotel. It had changed its clothes. The windows had been swept bare of draperies; the floors of rugs. The commanding officer and the sergeant-major each had offices in corners of the huge lobby; the rest of the space was filled with high, narrow white beds, already sheeted and blanketed and pillowed. Each of the five bedroom floors had been similarly prepared. Twelve hundred beds were waiting.

In August, the "seriously wounded" came pouring in. At the disembarkation hospitals they had been classified according to the degree and nature of their disabilities—four types of cases were sent to us, deaf and ear operative, eye operative, the more complicated of the neuro-surgical and the oro-plastics, those men for whom the knife or other artificial agencies were to create noses, ears, jaws or chins.

They usually arrived at night with no waving of flags or playing of bands. I shall never forget the first large group I saw waiting to be assigned to quarters. There were about a hundred of them. The ambulatory patients sat on their kit bags, the others lay on stretchers, placed temporarily on the floor. The lights seemed very dim, the white, worn faces stood out in sharp relief against the shadows. All were uncomplaining, all a little dazed looking, all silent. It was not of such a homecoming as this that they had dreamed when they waited for dawn in the trenches.

By the middle of September the hospital was functioning like a ninety horse power car. All day long fumes of ether came from the operating rooms where forty-thousand-a-year surgeons toiled on the pay of majors and captains. A full quota of orderlies, nurses and reconstruction aides carried out the officers' orders. Inspectors from Washington came and went. Records, drawings, casts were made which would enrich for all time the world's store of medical knowledge. But there was no achievement so notable as the victories of the spirit that went on hourly in the wards.

It was the nurse and the aide who for the most part witnessed those victories. The nurse had been accepted by the army as one of its component parts; the aide was an innovation unique in military history. But little has been written about her; the part she played in the great work of salvage has never been told. There were from two to five hundred of her in every large hospital, working in two groups, physio-therapists and occupational-therapists. The first gave the massage and electro-therapy and hydro-therapy treatments; the latter taught in improvised classrooms or in corners of corridors or at bedsides in the wards everything from calculus to basketry. Much of the work done by both was superficial but it was worth while because it gave the man temporary physical or mental respite.

Unlike her cousins of the canteen, the motor corps, the service clubs, the Red Cross, the Y, the Salvation Army, the Reconstruction aide failed to emerge in the eyes of the men and of the public as a type. Perhaps this was because she was of such infinite variety. The S. G. O. had said that she must be "over twenty-five and under forty." Usually she was, but sometimes she wasn't. She was the flapper, the girl of the twenties, the woman of the thirties, the forties and even of the fifties. She was the patriotic enthusiast who had taken a six weeks' course somewhere; she was the highly trained professional worker. Occasionally she was the girl who frankly wanted to get married; now and then she was the poseur who longed to be a ministering angel. In the main she was the capable, energetic, American girl who desired to do her bit. At her best she was a sort of liaison officer between the disabled man and life.

It transpired that through the very nature of her service and of her official status she had greater opportunities than either the doctor or the nurse to come close to the souls of the men. As for her status she was merely the stepdaughter of the army. Uniformed in blue and white in the hospitals and in dark gray and maroon on the street, she might wear the button, but not the insignia. Such privileges as insurance and one cent a mile were not for her. On the other hand, she might promenade with a private or dance with a non-com without fear of rebuke. In carrying out her orders, whether she massaged as a "physio" or taught as an "occupational," she had leisure for individual, personal conversation. And the men talked to her freely on every subject from religion to "the mess"; from world politics to the hospital personnel. An officer about to return to civilian life once said to me: "I have envied you your opportunity—you have been able to get the psychology of the men." I thought to myself: "Lieutenant, you would not have cared for their psychology. I have heard a number of them say that they would rather bump you off than a German."

In recalling the many men I knew to whom the war has brought a devastating disaster of some sort, three outstanding characteristics which each one seemed to possess come to my mind. They were all sorts and conditions of men—a variegated humanity. But in three respects they were all alike—and those three qualities will always keep the little tin soldier "passing fair" for me.

Disabled Men's Outlook on Life.

In the first place no man ever spoke of the big thing which had struck him down except occasionally and then he jested. "Hey!" said a Long Island youngster to his teacher one day. "Didn't Teddy have a tin ear? And hasn't Edison got one? I'm ahead of 'em both. I've got two." "Well," said the handless sergeant from Texas to me one day when I was awkwardly feeding him, "if they had knocked all my teeth out I believe that you would be willing to chew for me."

When one happened to show the aching wound for a second he always managed to cover it up with a gallant gesture. There was the blind Captain, a surgeon of 45, who interrupted my reading one night with an allusion to his home. I asked if he were married and saw instantly a tightening of the clenched fingers, an involuntary scowl. "Thank God, no," he said in a vehement tone. Then, "Pardon me. Please read on. Make it—let's see—'The Handbook of Hymen!'"

There was the big Dakota rancher whose teacher asked him if he ever swore. "I used to," he answered. "But what's the fun of doing it now? I can't hear myself." And there was an Irish American whom an aid surprised one day pulling his thick hair in agony. As she turned to leave, he called her back. "Want a lock?" Again he clutched his pompadour. "Indoor sports for invalided soldiers!"

That first Christmas back home we skated on thin ice. Of course the ice was thinnest on Christmas eve. There was a Christmas tree; there were to be carols, dances, turkey and all the trimmings. But last Christmas they hadn't thought that the next one would be like this. Now, of course, our own particular hospital was the best in the service. We had a human C. O. and Adjutant; we had an efficient Sergeant-Major. Undoubtedly it was because he was so efficient that the post men hated the Sergeant-Major. He was born a British subject. Personally I always suspected him to be a gentleman-ranker from the English army. At any rate, he was a "regular." He was not to be cajoled or intimidated or persuaded. He was reputed to be a woman hater, and during the flu an aid had lampooned him in a ditty beginning:

"The Sergeant-Maje, that 'narsty' fiend,
Has us all now quarantined.
If to the village we should stray,
With our lives we'd have to pay.
One step, he says, beyond the brink,
Dear madam, and you go to clink," &c.

Well, nobody loved him, but he came to the Christmas tree. All the men were there, too, in chairs or on beds which had been brought down. Candles, the lovely Christmas reds and greens and tinsels, with the Red Cross playing Santa Claus to every man. But over it all like a cold fog hung "the tears of things." Just when the fog threatened to swoop, the Chief Nurse, a big bodied, big souled woman

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